

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 11 September 2019

Wards: All

Subject: Findings of the CfPS scrutiny improvement review

Lead officer: Julia Regan, Head of Democracy Services

Lead member: Councillor Peter Southgate, Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Commission

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Recommendations:

- A. To discuss and comment on the findings of the review and to identify areas for improvement to be included in an action plan
 - B. To discuss and agree the process for the development of an action plan
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission agreed at its meeting on 20 March 2019 to carry out a review of the overview and scrutiny function in Merton and to develop an improvement programme, with assistance from the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), funded by the Local Government Association.
- 1.2. CfPS were asked to review Merton's overview and scrutiny function and to assess our practice against the government's recently published statutory guidance. It was anticipated that this independent review would be challenging whilst also being constructive in suggesting ways to strengthen scrutiny practice and drive forward improvement.
- 1.3. The review was carried out by Ed Hammond, Director of Research at CfPS. In carrying out the review, Ed Hammond met with the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members, Chief Executive and the Corporate Management Team, Scrutiny Chairs, Scrutiny Members, partner organisations and voluntary sector organisations as well as drawing on documentary evidence (such as the annual members survey, task group reports and scrutiny annual reports) and watching recordings of scrutiny meetings.
- 1.4. The findings of the review are set out in a letter to the Chair of the Commission, Councillor Peter Southgate, and are appended to this covering report.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. Members of the Commission are requested to discuss the findings of the review and consider how to approach the development of an action plan to strengthen and improve the overview and scrutiny function in Merton.
- 2.2. Members will be pleased to note that the overall findings are that scrutiny in Merton is effective; that it is well respected at senior levels in the organisation; that it has a positive, significant and sustained impact and that the scrutiny officer team is well regarded. Other strengths that were identified were the support that is provided during the topic selection and

work programming process; task group work and the carrying out of an annual member survey to assess the effectiveness of scrutiny.

- 2.3. The review has identified a number of areas where improvement could be made and has posed some challenges for the Commission to consider. The main areas that have been identified for improvement are summarised thematically below so that the Commission can focus its discussion on these and agree the approach it wishes to take to developing an action plan.
- 2.4. Agenda planning
- 2.5. To give more thought to the purpose and content of agenda items so that scrutiny has a clear purpose and outcome for each item – use a range of mechanisms including discussion at previous meeting, pre-meeting or agenda planning session between Chair, Vice Chair and departmental officers
- 2.6. To consider focussing on cross-cutting issues that affect the social fabric of the borough – see section 6.1 on “hot topics and slow burn issues”
- 2.7. To direct officers to reframe committee reports to include executive summaries and align content with member objectives for scrutiny of that issue
- 2.8. Could committee time be used differently, for example introducing more “task and finish” items into meetings?
- 2.9. External scrutiny
- 2.10. To review and revive Merton’s external scrutiny protocol that sets out the respective roles in relation to the scrutiny of partner organisations
- 2.11. Scrutiny officers to brief partner organisations prior to attendance at meetings and to follow up afterwards on how the meeting went and any agreed actions
- 2.12. Support to scrutiny members
- 2.13. To consider how best to support new members – perhaps through peer to peer mentoring from a pool of experienced scrutiny councillors?
- 2.14. To provide a wider range of leadership roles in scrutiny such as policy leads on particular issues as well as chair and vice chair positions on scrutiny committees and task groups
- 2.15. To consider mechanisms for sharing leadership roles between administration and opposition councillors
- 2.16. Member behaviour
- 2.17. Chairs and Group leaders to lead in re-inforcing a respectful and non-party political culture at scrutiny meetings
- 2.18. Developing an action plan
- 2.19. Commission members are asked to give a steer on the key improvements that they wish to be included in the action plan.
- 2.20. Members are also asked whether they wish to delegate the drawing up of an action plan to the Chair or to a small cross-party working group supported by

the Head of Democracy Services. It is anticipated that a draft action plan will be reported to the Commission's meeting on 13 November.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. The Commission has responsibility for keeping under review the effectiveness of the overview and scrutiny function and to recommend, where appropriate, changes in structure, processes or ways of working.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. Set out in paragraph 1.3 of the report.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. The timetable for drawing up and implementing an action plan is at the discretion of the Commission.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. None for the purposes of this report.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. Set out in paragraph 3.1 above.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. None for the purposes of this report.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. None for the purposes of this report.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. None for the purposes of this report.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- Findings of CFPS Scrutiny Improvement Review

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1. None

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